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Exposure terrifies the Red terrorists

Publicity as a weapon against terrorism.

The unfolding cloak-and-dagger epic of the plot to kill the pope is terrifying, anger-provoking, almost incredible, but most of all it is a reminder that our defense against the Soviet military threat is multifaceted and not based on military strength alone.

Italian Defense Minister Lelio Lagorio has charged that Bulgarian intelligence is implicated in the attack on Pope John Paul II last May. It was "an act of war in a time of peace," Lagorio said. Most observers believe that Bulgarian intelligence could not have acted without the knowledge and consent of the Soviet KGB.

When Roosevelt and Churchill at a World War II summit meeting spoke about enlisting the support of the pope, Joseph Stalin is supposed to have scoffed.

"How many divisions has the pope?" he asked.

That question was answered this past year: The pope has enough divisions to deter the Russians from sending their divisions into Poland to put down a restive nation as they did in Hungary, Czechoslovakia and Afghanistan.

The solution that an impatient covert action force would certainly at least consider would be to remove the pontiff by assassination. The trouble with assassination is that if you knock off their guy they'll knock off your guy. Lyndon Johnson, for instance, believed that

John F. Kennedy's death was plotted by Cuban agents in response to CIA efforts to kill Castro.

But a pope commands no death squads just as he commands no panzer divisions. There seemed little danger in trying to kill John Paul II, providing it was done by a terrorist well removed from the source of the plot.

There was and is a danger as the Bulgarian and Soviet secret services are now discovering, and as our own CIA previously discovered. Exposure is worse than retaliation.

Exposure of the CIA plots against Castro brought that agency under unwelcome scrutiny and new restraints from the public and Congress. Exposure of the evidence of Bulgarian and presumed Soviet involvement in the papal assassination attempt will seriously threaten Soviet prestige and hegemony in the Roman Catholic areas of Eastern Europe, particularly in Poland.

The danger is now apparent to the Soviet Bloc itself. The Bulgarians are conducting a desperate "Who, me?" propaganda campaign. The Soviets are trying to ridicule the Italian charges, laughing nervously and saying in effect, "It's ridiculous — don't you think it's ridiculous?"

The episode shows that the proper response to terrorism is not the James Bond "you get our guy, we'll get yours," but rather the detection and prosecution of individual terrorists and the public identification of their masters when such links are discovered and authenticated.